



A Poet in Center City Pt.3

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Photo by Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum
Mike Land at Molly's Books, South Philadelphia, 2005
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For the second Highwire show, Jim O'Rourke installed a nitrous tank in the stairwell behind the "factory room" and manned it. Whippets were sold for a dollar and almost everyone, including us, indulged. We were all in an exhilarated mood—it was now October, and attendance had doubled since the July show. We exhibited one of Trish's paintings, and she came with her sister. We were also able to show movies for the first time—our friend (and Trish's PAFA buddy) James Nguyen had two short ones, perfect for a venue and an event this size. Most importantly, the square worked cohesively (especially at keeping the money collection tasks in order, at Jim's behest), and no major balls were dropped between us. I learned about Ricky—when he had just the right kind of alcohol buzz going (we had loaded up on cases of wine for the event), he could be a sport. The best part of the night, for me in particular, was how effortless it all felt—the work of overseeing things (balloons in hand) was a pleasure for all of us. If there was a dark edge operative that night, it was that many artists were showing up who wanted to ride on the Free School gravy train, and not all of them had good or honorable intentions. John, in particular, would drink with anyone, and he was besieged with invitations. That John was incredibly charming was not in doubt; but those like myself watching, who cared about John, knew that beneath the charm was a sense of emptiness and inertia about his life which could be played upon. In all kinds of ways, including queer ways which I couldn't easily influence, John was ripe to be coerced. The therapist in him and the card-shark in him shared little common ground, and a gift for bonhomie was helping our shows but left desolate, pliant levels in him unconcealed. I struggled with my instinct to impose on John who he could and could not drink with, but not from a queer stance of complete understanding. It was for me to learn that when a queer and a straight are brothers, the queer will always feel misunderstood, no questions asked.

By now, on the surface at least, all of us were infected by the freewheeling spirit of the Free School. We were bummed that Bush had won a second term; but there was nothing that could be done. One of John's many chance acquaintances had bequeathed to him a little acid blotter sheet. So, one night, when Christopher and Ricky happened to be unavailable (Christopher in particular, being based in Roxborough/Manayunk, was in and out of Center City), we decided to trip. We started at my pad at 21st and Race; the acid was slow-burn, and took about ninety minutes to sink in. We had been listening to the ambient music, including Steely Dan, the whole time; it passed in front of me as something concrete. We somehow managed to stagger over to the Last Drop, and found ourselves occupying the basement, which was dimly lit (as ever) and dank. Neither of us could sit still, and John was stuttering. I had a fortuitous inspiration—I was seeing another B & N girl named Jenny Lee, who lived around the corner on Lombard between 13th and Broad. We could drop in on her. She was a stoner, after all, and forbearing. We found her entertaining a bunch of her Delaware friends (she was a U of Delaware BFA), including a gorgeous brunette named Erin. At first, John was OK. But when we smoked a bunch of weed on top of the acid, John became catatonic. He was rocking back and forth in an armchair, and wouldn't respond to questions. The Delaware crew became aggravated by John's bad vibes, so I got him out of there. I related to the entire trip as droll, because I knew John wasn't seriously upset, just stoned. Knowing John, and that the Delaware crew were bizarre and not particularly on our wavelength, he might've enacted the whole stutter routine just to have an excuse to get out. Seinfeld for stoners. John could, indeed, be prankish, and the pranks almost always manifested to get him off an unfair hook somehow. C'mon, he might say, these are your friends, right, Adam? The trip would've been better with all four of us on it, but what the hell.

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One of the incidents which transpired at this time was symptomatic of Philadelphia's mixed reaction to the Free School. I asked a U of Penn staff poet to read with us at the Highwire. He demurred, and I shrugged; but Jim O'Rourke revealed that, having discovered the Highwire through us, he'd gone behind our backs and booked a huge academy affiliated poetry event there. He didn't ask any of us to read. Now, he wasn't breaking any laws, but it was a cheap move, and very not Free School. So, employing the privileged position we'd established as Highwire regulars (crucially, Jim O'Rourke didn't attempt to dissuade us), we decided to put in a unified appearance the night of the reading. It was just as boring, rigid, and academic as we had expected—the important part for us was that we stole the show. Not only was our antagonist made visibly uncomfortable by our appearance, all the academicians appeared uncomfortable that we were there. Even just our looks ran rings around them. As I was later to learn, many academicians have beleaguered fantasies of being stars themselves, and want to be perceived as celebrities. The “Fab Four” gave them a pungent dose of the real thing. It was enough to make me think that Jim O'Rourke, who had smoked us all up in the factory room beforehand, had the whole thing planned when he booked the academy reading.

Not all of the Highwire Free School shows were big ones. We would do series of modest shows between the larger shows. The Bats were an all-girl band we wanted to book, so we did. John and I did a bunch of schmooze routines with them, at Tritone and elsewhere, and John and I were both in love with Tobi Simon, an old friend of Trish's and mine who played keyboards (and also painted). Tobi was tiny, an elf, with exquisite bone-structure in her face, chestnut hair, and bright blue eyes. Of the Bats, she was the most natural as a Free School person. I would later ascertain that by this time, Tobi was living a day-to-day life not unlike Christopher's. The paintings she was producing, a median blend of French Neo-Classical influence picked up at PAFA and queer girl East Coast-ism, were so powerfully formal and thematically expressive at the same time that I became amazed she could leave her flat at all without barfing. The irony was that the Bats were not unsuccessful— they were in the Philly press semi-constantly, with Tobi prominently featured, cheekbones and all. The scenesters who knew her as a rock star had no idea she even painted. And while she wasn't just what I would call a bisexual tart, her intense, full-lipped, fine-featured magnetism was registered by all. By this time, we had a new system going at the Highwire, by which the factory room and the main space would be used simultaneously. The night the Bats played, we had poets reading on a raised dais in the factory room. The factory room had high ceilings, but was darker, danker, and more private than the main space— a perfect place to smoke up or hook up. The poets were Temple kids, and one stuck out for us immediately, especially to John; a buxom, olive-skinned Latino named Lena. If I sensed that I would beat John to Tobi, he would certainly beat me to Lena, who liked his looseness over my rigor. Christopher and I were attempting to perfect a new way of combining poetry with visual imagery; he projected images on a screen behind me as I read that night. Frankly, we were both bored with dry poetry readings (no matter how attractive the participants), and this was our way of extending their range. This was, as was admittedly another yawn for both of us, another layaway plan gambit— the idea that eventually other artists would show up, on the East Coast or wherever, and be influenced to try what we'd tried, to experiment in the ways that we were experimenting. Nobody in art can really condone the Layaway Plan patrol we're all intermittently part of, but it's a fact of cultural life. Deal with it. Headed towards 2005, John's characteristic looseness was the keynote mood. Even if it meant that Christopher and I had to up the ante to six drinks per night out.

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Larsen Spurn had a birthday party at around this time at his studio at 13th and Carpenter. I wound up being the only Free School guy there. The four of us each had different sectors to work, and Larsen's was one of mine. At the time, Larsen had a menage situation going; he was living, not only with a stripper/burlesque artist named Lissy but with a couch-surfing teenage runaway named Anastasia. Anastasia was a wild child. She later tried to jump from one of the Highwire windows. That night, she insisted that everyone strip. We were passing around a bottle of Stoli; people were downing three or four shots at a time from the bottle. I decided to do them one better and down seven. For about fifteen minutes, I felt an overpowering sense of swirling ecstasy. Then, I got hit with a wave of nausea so intense I almost fainted. Everyone was very drunk and very stoned; I managed to drag my pile of clothes to the side of the circle and put them on. I didn't want to vomit all over the studio. I knew myself to be performing what was, for me, the greatest Intoxication Feat of all time— despite all the vodka-shots, I walked all the way from 13th and Carpenter to 21st and Race at 2 a.m. without puking. If I spent the rest of the night violently ill, I had done the right thing by the Free School; saved face before the big Intoxication Heavyweights of the Free School nexus, and entered the charmed circle (with John and Ricky) of the alcohol poisoned.

At this time, John and I established an ancillary beat to the beat we were doing in Philly. Who's to say that, given the proper venue, Philly Free School couldn't conquer Manhattan? John's sister Kyra lived on the Lower East Side. She was a burgeoning fashionista. Kyra looked like a female John; long, curly dark hair, dark eyes, slightly olive skin. To John's dismay, we clicked immediately. I was aggressive in those days, and Kyra and I flirted aggressively. Meanwhile, I was looking up my NYC contacts from the Nineties. The big hook-up was Samantha Fry, a singer-songwriter I met at the Sidewalk Café then doing anti-folk and who was still my friend. I was also in touch with Jeff Kim Chung, a Swarthmore grad I had worked with at B & N who was now doing a fiction MFA at Columbia. With Kyra's fashion contacts, we had the rudiments of an NYC Free School circle in place. The big venue target seemed to be the Bowery Poetry Club. Every time we went to NYC, John and I stopped in there to chat up the staff. We eventually got the e-mail of the guy who ran the place. He was slow to respond. And while we tried to get Ricky and Christopher in on the NYC shenanigans, it was clear that the problem was housing. Kyra could fit John and I comfortably in her little studio; but all four of us would have been absurd. I was hoping to court both Samantha and Kyra. John and I were still doing our pot n' books routing at B & N in Philly, and the whole Free School adventure became like living in a haze. If there was a rock beneath us at this point, it was Jim O'Rourke. We still, all of us, had the Highwire like a fist, and that was still where we had the most fun.

The next time John and I hit NYC, we went with Kyra to see Samantha play solo at a club on Ludlow Street. I spent the night flirting with both of them. At one point, we were all sitting on a couch, and I had one on either side of me. We must've looked outrageous. Samantha lived far away in Brooklyn, whereas Kyra was only a few blocks away. Plus, John and I had a bunch of things to do the next day. So, I decided to stick around. Oddly enough, I never got another chance to hook up with Samantha. Kyra and I were hot and heavy all over each other. John, in the next room by the end of the night, just had to take it and go to sleep. I knew I was being cruel, but my blood mastered me then. The next day, the three of us went to see John Ashbery read in the West Village. We also stopped in to see our contacts at BPC, and it looked like we were finally going to get a date. John was only slightly more moody than usual. As for Kyra, I could tell that the night before hadn't been a big deal for her. I had it in me to be smooth about moving on too. John and I slept on the Chinatown bus back to Philly. Because John and I were both decent raconteurs, I guessed that the story about Kyra and I would do the rounds very fast. During a promiscuous era in Center City, I knew that the recounted drama would be all to the good. I could also sense in the air that some kind of drama would come to a head between Ricky and I.

In the bars and the clubs, artistic types were beginning to migrate towards the Free School crew when we went out together. We didn't always have to search aggressively, or to be "on" anymore. I don't recall how we came to meet Heather Mullen. The first memory I have of Heather is of her sitting with us for some reason at McGlinchey's. Perhaps we met her there. She was tallish, about 5'7, handsome rather than pretty, in a thick-browed, Frida Kahlo-ish way, brunette waves covering a high, well-shaped forehead, big bones forced to hold only a little extra. The way she moved, her physiology, managed both to convey and impose a direct and uncompromising sense of straight sexuality. This, even as her looks were divisive—Christopher and John, for instance, found her appearance repellent. I fell pretty hard for her, but kept it to myself. And while Heather wasn't a loud mouth, she made very plain that if you wanted her in on something, her opinion, her voice had to command respect. She was used to social contexts in which she could lay down laws, from California (where she started) on out. She was writing novels. She and Ricky were combustible. But the knife-edge current in the air, even on this first night, was that she wanted me too. I hung back, and let Ricky win, which was painful but (I felt) necessary. Ricky and Heather became an item almost instantly. In a way, Ricky was a more apropos target for Heather—they were both authentically self-destructive. They were also, I was later to find, derisive about me behind my back. We arranged a reading specifically for the five of us at Molly's Books in South Philly. Oddly, Heather's heart-on-the-sleeve prose aligned her more with John Rind than with Ricky, who tended to ape the loopy surrealism of Foster Wallace and the McSweeney's crew who were big then. It's important to realize—neither John nor Ricky ever really committed themselves to being artists. That was Christopher and I. Heather used writing to express where she stood as a politico in the world. Her writing was a means to a political end. It meant that, in some ways, Christopher and I were safe with each other in a way that we couldn't be safe with the others. You wouldn't want to call them impostors, but no one would valorize them for having the nerve to create anything that special either. If Christopher couldn't use them as proteges or acolytes, he often kept to himself a sense of boredom (which I spotted) with their antics. Heather he found dull for the tangent reasons I've already mentioned. Agit-prop writing tends to fail when it's presented alone. I was more baffled by my intense attraction to Heather, who I saw through rose colored lenses at the time. One reason I had brought Sara Blount back into the fold was for her to meet Ricky—they were firing off on similar literary cylinders. Somehow, the meeting never came off—Sara was a delicate bird, easily frightened away. But Heather stuck. And as she and Ricky were soon living together, and as she was dragging all her social contacts (some artists, some young politico types) to Free School shows, the whole Free School experience was deepening and darkening into something more personal, more "felt," than it had been before.

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When the square was initiated, the only circuit which didn't function properly was Christopher-Ricky. Over the course of a year, more tension developed as the John-Ricky circuit became more active. When The Drinkers drank, they liked to take the piss just generally; because Christopher could be awkward, and his social mannerisms were so unique, he was easy pickins' for The Drinkers in general. Ricky was constantly goading John to be harder and more callous; John wanted desperately to be impressive to Ricky, and idealized him as a big brother figure; both The Book Nerds bore the brunt of their chemistry, but Christopher in particular got victimized. Predictably, Ricky lorded his relationship with Heather over us, and it stimulated him to greater displays of rambunctiousness. Ricky wanted to invert things; to place himself at the top. My strategy against him was to keep working my circuit with John on a day-to-day basis, so that we could work without Ricky getting in the way. At this point, we worked towards another big Highwire show, with Larsen and his band (ElektroWorx). We even had a place for one of Larsen's DJ friends. By the time the show happened, Jim O'Rourke was there with a nitrous tank again. This time, throngs of teenagers from the suburbs showed up. Jim wisely hid the nitrous tank, as the Highwire momentarily went "rave."

Lena, the Temple student who had read with us more than once, was on the scene quite a bit then. She and John were very tender with each other, and Ricky liked to play up the “double date” angle and bring Heather in on the action. I wasn’t seeing anyone steadily, and detested feeling like a fifth wheel. When this formation emerged, I would leave. It’s just that Heather was a sugar-cube underneath, and we had a little secret pact going, and knew it. By Bloomsday ’05 (June 16), we had entered into a full-on, passionate affair, and Ricky was out. Ouch. All the while, John and I had picked up the cudgel to put together a huge poetry reading at the Khyber, patterned after the Poetry Incarnation reading in ’65 Swinging London. It wasn’t an entirely joyless enterprise, but without Christopher and Ricky there was little esprit de corps. Now we just felt like ordinary hustlers; even if, for the first time, the Philly press were showing some interest in us. We hammed the event up verbosely for them. The darkest cloud on the horizon for me personally was D.P. Plunkett and his crew. The Free School had found ways to upstage them, but we were falling apart. The Plunkett poets read at Poetry Incarnation ’05 with many others; but they were morose at the event because we didn’t treat them like stars. They reacted by concocting a spurious tale that I had withheld money from them and began to circulate it after the event. If I wanted to survive, I knew I’d have to stop dissipating my energies and focus on poetry in a singular way. There was no other way to conquer the Plunkett goons; and I’d learned that art events are all too ephemeral. There was little in them left to keep. I had one major piece out in Jacket Magazine; it was time to build on it. And ponder Heather.

Times had changed in America, and in the Western world in general. The Free School had taken some notice of the Internet; we had a blog. But a vista had opened for me with poetry and the Net— I saw an unlimited amount of possibility in that conjunction. After all, poems are compressed and can be read relatively quickly. During the autumn of '05, I turned the Philly Free School blog into a poetry journal— Philly Free School Post— P.F.S. Post. With P.F.S. Post came an era during which I wasn't "in the street" as much. It was an auspicious time to reign myself in— John Rind, especially, had been caught in a social maelstrom with Free School hangers-on who had now migrated over to the Plunkett goons. It was a sick, alcoholic, head-smashing scene. The gossip and back-biting were terrible. The remnants of our social network were lost in absolute entropy— and if I didn't work fast and hard, I'd have been lost too. I myself was also drawn in to attend some Plunkett readings at the time. It was a scene of poseurs and flatulently undereducated blowhards— but they were well-connected in Philly, more so than I was, so I couldn't afford to ignore them. John and I disrupted them by being physically attractive— they looked like mongrels and dogs. They even had the nerve to follow our lead and do readings at the Khyber. The first lesson I learned about the poetry world was an important one— the vast majority of poets are physically unattractive and (for the most part) sexually inactive. Those who embody actual sex, as John and I did, are abhorrent to them. I made a quick decision— I wasn't going to give up sex to be a poet (and I did mean hetero sex). That sacrifice would be too great, especially as fecundity of mind often follows from fecundity of body.

The other key decision I'd made was to pursue a graduate education past my MFA. Many poets (especially avant-gardists) in the Philadelphia area had PhDs. So, I applied to a bunch of PhD programs, and received the University Fellowship to study and teach at Temple University. This meant a stipend and health insurance benefits— I wouldn't need to work at B & N anymore. I had no intention of becoming a pedant (especially where the arts were concerned), but teaching at the university level seemed like a reasonable way to earn a living. I was still doing my MFA, but was rapidly evolving into an avant-gardist (avant-garde terrain in contemporary culture being intellectually richer than standardized), and so couldn't learn much from a faculty dominated by sentimentalists and Pulitzer bed-warmers. I began, past Jacket Magazine, to publish internationally as well, especially online. The Plunkett poets were provincial in comparison, and while I couldn't compete with their Philly connectedness (some connections were Old Money ones, some South Philly), I could begin to connect myself on other levels. The Center City art scene at the time, not just us and the Plunketts but the DJs, musicians, and impresarios who ran the club-nights we'd been competing against, was growing rather dark. Everyone seemed to be drunk all the time. If it was a train-wreck, it was a fascinating train-wreck— all the exhibitionism was dramatic and intelligent (John and Ricky were exemplars); but I was working towards writing actual books, and Center City for me began to be a more solitary place. I wanted to survive the wreckage.

By the time I finished my MFA in mid '06, I had two operative blogs— P.F.S. Post and Stoning the Devil. Stoning the Devil I used for lit-crit and general commentary. The final summer residency, compared to earlier ones, was an anti-climax; no drama with profs, no sex. I spent the residency reading *Infinite Jest* and writing a new series of poems I called *Madame Psychosis*. It was an experiment in a new kind of poetic portraiture. By the time I began at Temple in August, I was ready to submit a manuscript with *Madame Psychosis* and a few other new series (serial writing having become one of my stocks in trade) to a major publisher. The manuscript was called *Beams*, and was accepted for publication some time in '07. Christopher was staging a series of events around his photographs; I helped him when I could. John was on the bar scene as usual. Through Temple, I met a group of poets in my age group who had recently descended on Center City from Amherst, Massachusetts. They were very status-conscious, and were status-seekers themselves. They had some Free School-level moxie around alcohol and drugs, even if they seemed frigid in other ways. I learned from them. The wisdom they taught me was dark— that unless you have a clan of poets to work out of, you're unlikely to make it as a poet in America. The Plunkett poets weren't quite enough to teach me this lesson, but after the Amherst crew I never forgot it. I also never forgot that I was staking my claim on iconoclasm— living a life as a sexually active heterosexual male not affiliated with any particular group, including (by this time) the Philly Free School. I could only survive by going against the grain, and I knew it. And as Heather had pointed out, semi-smirking.

What was new to me then was being alone in Center City. It was no longer the case that every time I left my apartment, I was guaranteed a new adventure. I became more settled in my habits. The Last Drop was convenient for me in many ways; it became part of my daily routine. I would sit there with a stack of books and do my academic work and write. Letters to Dead Masters began as an idea from that. John at this point was on his way out, off to L.A. to do video work. Christopher I saw fairly often; he was engaged briefly, then that broke off. Ricky studiously avoided running into me, though he was situated at Temple too. The Temple campus, in North Philadelphia, was a disappointment—a concrete jungle. Anderson Building, where dwelt the English Department on floors nine-eleven, was particularly hideous—a sky-rise done in tacky “nouveau” style. The English Department had all uncarpeted floors, and I was given an office with no windows. Because it was so forbidding, being on the Temple campus always elicited a crepuscular feeling in me. I was both doing and attending random readings around Center City; but none had the cohesive magnetism of the Free School shows. Many of the Center City streets seemed to have languished into deadness with the coming recession, or perhaps been petrified. I came up with the term “visionary deadness” to describe Center City then. It was a contradictory term, and meant that way. When I found myself reunited with Trish, I still enjoyed the funky, earthy ambience of West Philly—the Satellite Café, Mariposa, Clark Park. Trish and I, nonetheless, were forced to do an uncomfortable dance then. We had been, and remained, licentious about sex and drugs; but the holy shrine Trish set up around her painting highlighted something I’d missed the first go-round. Trish sought obsessively to remain, through her paintings, as pure as possible in the world. I was making careerist compromises left and right to advance my literary interests; compromises Trish frowned upon. If her painting life was forced to remain a privatized enterprise, she would deal. Sometimes, she did. But she felt hostile to the idea of any interference at all, and it meant that she was often lost, for months and years at a time, in inactivity. I was as brusquely active as I could possibly be. There was a level of my thinking I sought to hide from her—everything I did, any strides made towards public recognition, were being made to advance her interests as well. If she lacked the gumption to make herself famous, I would corral some extra gumption and do it for her. I never stopped believing in her, even as this time there was nothing quite as festive about nudity and pot smoke. We had the nights mechanically built into us from before, and dutifully followed through our usual scripts. With my new sense of place-vibes, anything at a substantial tangent to Center City, yet still related to it, worked for me (including Temple) when I was in the right mood. And I missed Tobi, who was painting at genius level then.

I had begun to visit Chicago every six months. The visits were oriented around poetry and poetry readings. Wicker Park in Chicago reminded me very much of Manayunk in Philly, and the Loop was interesting to me for being as clean as the nicer bits of D.C. and having the scale of Manhattan. Palatine, where I stayed, was a Bucks County equivalent. The sky in Illinois and Wisconsin looked different, hazier, closer, than it did at home. Times were dark for me, however, in Center City— not only because I'd broken up with Trish again, and icily, but because I was on the verge of all-out war with the Plunkett poets. I was gaining power and currency— I was out-publishing them. But the fight wasn't really fair; it was a group of them against one writer, standing alone. No one creative wants to stand completely alone in the world. The Plunketts had important hook-ups in every direction, including academic ones, and the formation, considering the level I was writing on then, and that I was morally and ethically innocent, was a true parasite wall. The main circuits they engaged were gossip-oriented circuits— I was constantly being slandered (and the accusations were slander-level ones) in places I used to love, like McGlinchey's and Dirty Frank's. John, when he was around, would always (I later heard) rush to my defense; but many minor Free School characters had defected and were arrayed against me. I reacted to these pressures (and the pressures of my career at Temple) by being punkish, anti-martyr-ish, and by redoubling my efforts, especially where the two blogs were concerned. It worked; I soon had a substantial audience for both blogs. That Center City could feel like a battle-ground was something I hadn't known before. Plunkett, in particular, was absolutely maniacal about getting me the hell out of his way, and (unfortunately for me) he had Temple backing to do it. Lines running were meant to be nooses around my neck. What saved me, quite unequivocally, was the Internet. I had a life online they couldn't touch. The Internet was its own "New Art City," which held as many levels of excitement to it as Center City Philly had when I first arrived here.

Trish did a portrait of us together, as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: *The Fall*. I'd nude modeled for it in '07, in her then studio in North Philadelphia. When she told me, in the early Aughts, "You're the jewel in my crown," she was already planning this. The studio was not far from Temple, with a view of the Walt Whitman Bridge which was re-created through a window in the piece. In the portrait, I appear baffled, but composed. Trish's limbs wrap awkwardly around themselves, as though she might actually topple over. It was as startlingly confessional as it could possibly be. It took me several years to understand what the issue was. *The Fall* was shown at PAFA, in an alumni show, in '08. One of my books was being taught, hand-over-fist, at Loyola in Chicago, and I lectured there behind it. From time to time, Bill Rosenblum would record me reading my poetry and send me the mp3s. Occasionally, a poet passing through from London or Australia would visit me. Sometimes, Larsen and I could get into some Free School-level drug mischief. Mostly, though, I was on my own, writing. The lovers, Julie, Dell, who entered my life at this juncture, didn't last very long. Julie Hayes was my student at Temple: an excellent head for books, and a potential writer. Her volatility and self-destructiveness reminded me extremely of Heather Mullen. I thought it might be another marriage, but the volatile situation tanked fast. What I had to conquer was the feeling that I had to be heading towards something huge. Too many poets in Philly were arrayed against me; if I didn't find a way to overpower them, I would (inevitably) be overpowered. This is what most of the defectors from my erstwhile camp banked on. Little Fieled, the party line went; he'll keep working and working, but it will never be enough, because it can't be. Not with us here: Plunkettville. Most of these people were primarily socialites who took for granted that that's what poetry was; a context for socialization, fags meeting fags, rather than a serious art-form. "You are who you know" was the dictum, and they tap-danced around ever speaking seriously about poetry itself, or poems. I was always on the edge of being counted out. Temple didn't help; no one there was particularly interested in my poetry efforts, and the poets on campus actively opposed them. I suffered the indignity of having my books taught hand-over-fist at major universities while being treated as a pedestrian graduate student at Temple. But I never gave up hope and I never thought of quitting. If this was "do or die," I would do. What *The Fall* was, as a work of art embodying the highest possible formal, representational standard, gave me strength to persevere, and the sense that no one could tell me I wasn't a loved person, or that I'd led a loveless life. Trish had delivered the goods, and transmuted exquisite anguish into exquisite art. I was standing with a real family that was really there. I stood on level ground.

During '09, I got in an extensive series of arguments online. By then, they had a name— “flame wars.” I was rather adept at flame war strategies, and for the entire summer the arguments raged on. A conflagration of another sort was unfolding that summer at the Last Drop. The culprits were two young ladies, a Temple and a U of Arts undergrad. Ginny was a voluptuous redhead and a promiscuous tease. Adrian was a raven-haired theater major and ambitious social climber. Together they did the dirty business of turning the Drop into a hectic soap opera. I was considered a suitor to these two and one of the main players. As the summer swirled round and round, everyone came to the realization that Ginny and Adrian weren't actually going to sleep with anyone. It was sad and pathetic simultaneously— I later learned that some of the other faux-suitors were conspiring against me behind my back. I was being accused of rampant misogyny and even rape. The whole situation had an eerie quality, and it was an eerie summer. I was pushing the hell out of Stoning the Devil. By August, I was also working on a series I'd had around for years— Apparition Poems. I had an eerie sense that I was finally on the verge of creating the most overpowering poems I could possibly write— but by September, I was stuck again. Providentially, I was leading into my second Fellowship year at Temple; for '09-'10, I had no teaching responsibilities.

As the autumn of '09 progressed, I was more isolated in Center City than I'd ever been before. Even Trish had moved to New York, in materially unpromising circumstances, to pursue an MFA, at an institution less vaunted than PAFA. In early November, there was a fluke heat wave. I found I couldn't sleep. I was having racing thoughts, the way I'd had as a teenager. It felt about the intensity of a profound LSD trip. For almost two weeks, I hovered in this limbo state. As I did, the full, precise decade I'd spent in Center City passed through my consciousness over and over again, at warp speed— Trish, Penn, Philly Free School. All the faces and places, Baltimore Avenue, 21st Street, PAFA campus, buzzed around my brain in a bewildering montage of vignettes. This intermixed with a sense of violence, of the potentiality of violent death in all directions. My brain whirled round and round with imagery: bodies (of friends, lovers, and enemies) hurled off bridges, shot to death in backyards, ripped to shreds with knives in alleyways. I had to purge the decade out of me somehow. I took the three degrees I'd earned off the wall and put them in the closet, then replaced them again. I gave the mirror in my dressing room (21st and Race hadn't had one) the old right hook, but it didn't crack. When my feet touched the ground again, I dug into Apparition Poems with renewed fervor. My mind had expanded (as it had from taking and passing my Comps in the spring), and new vistas had opened up. For the next several months, I did four "Apps" a day. There was something strange in Center City that winter, which I hadn't seen or felt before— a spirit of enchantment. I called it (again) "visionary deadness." It felt like a charmed time, as personally hollowed out as it was— the new Apparition Poems were given a warm reception, especially in Europe. I liked to walk around Center City pre-dawn, and watch the sun rise from the streets. Again, desolation and solitude balancing gracefulness and progress. Some of the charmed events of the time were absurd— when there was a fire on my floor of my apartment building, they had to enter my apartment to open my windows (I was with everyone else in the lobby), and they used a volume of Coleridge to hold my door open.

#49

It occurred to me during the composition of Apparition Poems that I might make a video to go on YouTube around the poems. I asked Bill Rosenblum; he had the equipment. He said yes. So, one mild day in March '10, I took the #34 trolley up Baltimore Avenue, got off at 50th, walked two blocks over to Cedar and two up to 52nd and Cedar, Bill's compound. We set up shop in the front room, which had an all-window façade out into the street. The neighborhood, wedged between West and North Philadelphia, was extremely unlikely as a literary hotspot, but the light in the front room was good owing to this façade. We took about a half an hour to tape the ten minute video, only to find that it was slightly too long to fit on YouTube. It was a bummer that was to be rectified five months later. But we took it easy, smoked a little pot as always and he sent me the m-peg. I was also scheduled to read in Brooklyn at around this time, and cancelled. I had decided for myself that poetry readings were a bore and a waste of time— no one listens to anyone else, and poetry just doesn't work as any kind of compelling spectacle. If I had to give up seeing Samantha again, so be it. I was also publishing a series of polemical essays in Europe which stirred up a substantial amount of controversy both here and in the States. And when spring kicked in, I thought something might perk up in the Center City scene to draw my attention again, but that didn't happen. Enchantment had given way to some equanimity and some lethargy.

#50

It was always painful to see Larsen Spurn around. The last time we'd hung, in the eerie summer of '09, he'd laced some pot we were smoking with PCP, and it sent me on a trip. I decided then and there that I couldn't hang with him anymore; I was too old to be doing this shit. Larsen had some signs of maturity on his person, but mostly he hadn't changed at all from how he'd been at the turn of the century. The reckless twinkle in his eye was gone; he no longer seemed to have a lucky knack for getting away with things. Partly it was because, by mid '10, it was clear to everyone that we were in the grips of a major recession. Jobs were being lost; resources of all kinds were becoming more and more scarce; everyone had less materially than they used to. Because what all of us started off with in Center City was not that substantial materially, many of the Center City artists I had known were turning to ashes. It created a mood anti-sex, anti-drugs, anti-art, anti-anything but survival. Larsen, Bill, Pete, Tobi, all impressed me as looking like animals at this time; if I could've helped them, I would've. Instead, I kept writing as much as I could and kept to myself.

The book *Apparition Poems* was released in June '10. I knew not to expect much at first; I wouldn't win any prizes for it, and it was unlikely to land on bestsellers lists. But it was money in the bank for me all the same. I had quit the two blogs, and thrown all my weight behind my books. I felt it was crucial at this time to do so; if I continued with the blogs, poets who wanted to dismiss me could always take the cheap and easy way out and just use my blogs as reference points. I was discovering that in many ways, poets in America really were (at least partially) the dregs of humanity. They always make a calculated attempt to shut out everything except what's au courant in their little groups; and, more importantly, few of them have a serious interest in poetry as an art-form. For poets in America, poetry is mostly used as a context for socialization, and to sanitize the art portion of the gig. Poets are would-be socialites, and sanitizers, and the idea of a poet standing alone, as an individual, is anathema to them. This was certainly true of the Plunkett poets and the Amherst group; and what it amounted to for me was the sense that I couldn't mix with poets at all anymore. The "fun" had largely gone out of my life after Trish, Tobi, Heather, and the Free School ended; but I liked living with the rough edges of being a working man, rather than a flake.

In the fall of '10, I was teaching at Temple again. I was also working on my prospectus. For the first time, I had a sense of peace on the Temple campus. I had proven myself to myself. God knows, it would be too much to ask for any of these sour profs to recognize my achievements. Most of them were frustrated artists and scholars themselves. As for the kids I was teaching, I found them, as usual, very tricky. They didn't want to be there. If you weren't rigorous enough, they would rip you to shreds; if you were too rigorous, they would rebel. I tried to find some kind of golden mean, as I had previously, but I never felt that I quite got it right. In a sense, I had no real personal life anymore. Everything I did was related to my work by one tangent or another. I was always waiting for some chiasmus to happen between me and someone else (could be an artist or a woman, or both), but it didn't happen then. It was even hard to do hang-out routines with Bill Rosenblum, who didn't give a rat's ass about literature and really wasn't aware of the battle I was fighting. But what I had earned, in my solitude, was a fundamental self-respect I hadn't had before. I was the artist I wanted to be, and that I always knew I could be, even though few shared my opinion when I was young. The bozo adjuncts and grad students who threw themselves into my path could no longer engineer conversations which forced me to deny my life as an artist. I had the finger on them. I knew how to manipulate their queries into ones I could work with. Even as the chore of dealing with an already overripe body of work would take me the rest of my life. And the artists who had been golden for me, and Philly, would and could never die.

"A Poet in Center City" is still uncompleted